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Ky. Winemakers Market Operations

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MIDWAY, Ky. — Bill Longarzo emerged from the wine-tasting room at Equus Run Vineyards clutching a bottle of reserve cabernet sauvignon.

"I found it very pleasant," the former Army officer said of his selection. "And the fact that it's a local vintage makes it more appealing."

For Longarzo and hundreds of others who came to this winery in Kentucky's horse country on a recent evening, the experience was about more than just wine. They ate a buffet meal, listened to a local band, and strolled the willowy grape vines and winemaking facility on the one-time tobacco farm.

Kentucky winemakers are being encouraged to market their operations as tourist attractions to squeeze profits from a highly competitive industry dominated by brands from California and Europe.

Longarzo, of Lexington, was part of a gourmet group that made the short journey past picturesque thoroughbred farms and rustic stone fences to attend the finale of Equus Run's summer concert series.

The winery plays up the area's equine tradition. Equus is Latin for horse. And the winery sits next to a thoroughbred farm in Woodford County.

"People love the experience of being close to thoroughbred country, enjoying the ambiance of a vineyard and sipping the product," said vineyard owner Cynthia Bohn. "They get to see it from soil to shelf."

The Napa Valley region in California drew 2.5 million visitors in 2000, according to a California consulting firm that assessed the potential for Kentucky's industry. Closer to Kentucky, several dozen wineries in Missouri attracted the same number of visitors, the report said, while 425,000 people visited 25 wineries in Indiana.

One suggestion is that Kentucky promote a trail for wine enthusiasts to follow from vineyard to vineyard. But the industry needs to sprout a bit more, said David Loney, president of the Kentucky Vineyard Society.

"There are a couple more dots that need to be filled in before we can connect them into a wine trail that makes a pleasant day trip," he said.

Eight wineries produced more than 4,700 cases of grape wine in Kentucky last year, and three more wineries have opened since then, said Gerald Dotson, director of value-added foods for the state Agriculture Department. By 2007, homegrown wine production is expected to reach nearly 34,000 cases in Kentucky, or about 2 percent of the state's wine sales.

Grape growing for wine has deep roots in the rich Kentucky soil. The nation's first commercial vineyard was planted in Kentucky in 1798 by Jean Jacques Dufour, winemaker for the Marquis de LaFayette. By

1860, Kentucky was the third-largest wine producing state. The tradition withered with Prohibition, when grapevines were ripped from the ground.

Re-establishing the industry has been slow, with inexperienced growers and a lack of winemaking knowledge seen as the biggest hurdles.

The consultant recommended that the state hire an enologist and a viticulturist to assist Kentucky vintners and growers. The state had a viticulturist until funding for the position lapsed, Dotson said.

Grape vines can thrive in Kentucky's soil and climate, Dotson said. One drawback is the humid summers that can spawn plant diseases, prompting greater use of fungicides than in other places, he said.

Bohn spent seven years taking classes and talking to consultants before starting the vineyard. The preparation has paid off. After four years of production, Equus Run has already won gold medals in competitions on both coasts, beating many well-known brands. The vineyard is also reaping robust profits, Bohn said.

Kentucky grapes are grown on small plots, just like tobacco. The potential exists for tobacco farmers to convert land to vineyards, though the general lack of experience and expertise is a drawback, Dotson said.

"Grape growing is a very labor-intensive business," he said. "But because tobacco farmers have the machinery and know-how to use the pesticides it can be a perfect fit for some of them," Dotson said.

Bohn's blueprint includes more growth. The winery's production will more than double to an expected 10,000 cases in 2004, she said. In November, ground will be broken for a 1,400-seat amphitheater.

Last year, 14,000 people visited the tasting room at Equus Run, a figure already exceeded this year. Guests are invited to pack a picnic for the vineyard or to fish bordering Elkhorn Creek for smallmouth bass.

On the Net:

Equus Run Vineyards: <http://www.kyvine.com>

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